

Those of you who know me well, know I was raised a secular humanist, and am a more recent convert to Anabaptism with its distinctives such as peacemaking, sharing of goods in common, loving the enemy and the doctrine of free will most closely matching my upbringing. I find a remarkable degree of congruence between Anabaptist distinctives and the life of the early church as we find in Acts 2, the traditional Pentecostal text for this Sunday. It's a refreshing honesty in our faith that I have great affection for.

So it puzzles and pains me when other faith communities sharing the same texts with us seem to be able to adopt a just war theology, or assert the right of retributive violence for murder or accidental death, and seem to set great store by their most important work - that of dividing Christians against each other. I'm sure some of my perspectives of these faith communities isn't wholly accurate, but this has been a stumbling block for me for a long time.

However, recently, I've been given a new, larger frame to hold all my perspectives, not only of various Christian faith communities (including our own) but also other communities such as Islam, Buddhism, and the secular marketplace. This new frame was given on a succession of evenings this winter as I was returning from night school at BCIT. The CBC radio program **Ideas** began Just as I got out of class, so I had half an hour of deep thoughts with radio host Paul Kennedy and a 5-part interview series with the well-known French philosopher and Christian thinker Rene Girard, called *The Scapegoat*. None of what I say to you in this message will be new to you - in one way or another it has all been said before. But I intend to drive home to you the great difficulty - the almost-futile nature of our struggle to live as God intends us, in the hope that you will be inspired to do just that.

Girard passed away late last year, but this excellent series distils years of Girard's thought and several of his books into 5 one-hour episodes, and since those evenings in February, these ideas of Girard's had been percolating in my head, as I made connections, but struggled to share them with some of you. So when Evan pointed out that it was proving difficult to get a speaker for this Sunday, I thought I would force myself on you, and distil 5 hours of interview with Girard into twenty minutes, complete with specific examples that illustrate the distress we often find ourselves in as we try to make sense of our world. What issues? What distress?

I'd already written the bulk of this message when I heard the news that Kelly Ellard was set to achieve a parole, something she'd been turned down for many times before. Kelly Ellard was one of two people convicted of murdering Reena Virk, a fellow student, by engaging a group of youth in violence against Reena by kicking and punching her until she was unconscious, and then following her as she got away, to drown her in the water. Reena Virk didn't really fit in - a Jehovah's Witness in a Sikh culture, she was accused of stealing a boyfriend and slandering others as the acts which led to her murder. The ritual and unfair nature of this murder shocked many across Canada, and the term "girl violence" was used to try to explain the killing. It was then, that I put my finger on what exactly Girard said to our society twenty and thirty years ago in his books.

In essence, Girard said that even though Christ has sacrificed himself to give us a new world of peace, love and justice, we have free will to continue to exercise our old violent ways, and many people still make use of them. Bullying, ostracism and violence still occurs today, in school, at the workplace, in politics, in the studio, even in polite company, where often it's ignored or excused

rather than confronted. At any time, a group of any of us can re-enact William Golding's book *Lord of the Flies*, a story of a group of school boys cast away on an island who survive by becoming a brutal group of thugs and committing ritual murder. Anyone who doubts that was not at either Stanley Cup riot. You think we're too civilized for that? I have two words for you: carry-on baggage.

Girard's thought struck me squarely between the eyes. I am a child of the Enlightenment, the Age of Reason. I grew up with my father quoting John Stuart Mill at me from his essay "On Liberty", and with the "social contract" of Thomas Hobbes in his book *Leviathan*, as an antidote to the old "life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" or the days we read of in the Bible in Judges 17 and 21 where "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." This is our history.

As a child of the Enlightenment believe firmly in the social contract between all people that permits some to rule, others to be ruled, so that all may benefit. We no longer sacrifice one entirely for the sake of others, but we seek to do the greatest good for the greatest number. I stand with the underdog, I struggle against oppression, I help the less fortunate, and I shake my head at the greed of certain others in my righteous indignation. I really thought this world was getting better all the time as a result of this "social contract". And Rene Girard overturned all that for me in the example of Kelly Ellard.

Girard identified the scapegoat as the very foundation of cultural life, of civilization. Going back into the mists of prehistory, predating civilizations, we have an old, old mechanism for maintaining order in society, from preventing ourselves from being constantly at war with each other. It begins with a process that Girard called 'mimetic desire'. Mimetic desire. The deliberate imitation of one act of desire by another. The deliberate imitation of one act of desire by another.

Imitative desire begins early on - we have all seen two children playing together. When one begins to play with a toy, the second child immediately wants to play with it too. Boys in high school desire to get the girl with the figure that appeals to them, and most often it is the girl who is already attached to a different boy. When I was in high school, we sought to be different from others, but we all wore the same brand of jeans, those of us who smoked, smoked the same brand of cigarettes. Mimetic desire caused Cain to murder Abel. Cain sought God's approval just as Abel had received it.

Genesis 4:4-7:

⁴And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, ⁵but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. ⁶The Lord said to Cain, 'Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? ⁷If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you; you must master it.'

God, in addressing Cain, also addresses us: he touches on the heart of what it is to be human. We all seek approval in the same ways. And we all fail to master our rivalries, our mimetic desires.

Mimetic desire is not all bad. Because we learn everything through imitation, we perform tremendous feats of innovation in order to achieve our desires. Our tools, agriculture, language, technology, science, religion, literature, drama, visual arts all arose out of our ability and desire to imitate.

But because we also learn what to desire through imitation, our shared desires lead us into conflict. As we compete to possess the object we all want, this competition can lead to envy, rivalry and eventually conflict and violence. Anybody ever been dumped for another by a girlfriend/boyfriend?

Rivalry. This rivalry is built into the very nature of mimetic desire. And if rivalry is allowed to continue unchecked, it leads to endless cycles of conflict, hostility and destruction. Eventually, the rivalry becomes even more important than the object of desire. This theme is well done by Shakespeare in Romeo and Juliet where each of the lovers - particularly Romeo - has rivals and imitators in Mercutio, Tybalt and Paris, and the rivalry eventually costs five deaths.

And here's the funny thing. Being human, the objects of our desire are not fixed. Compare humans to cows: when cows are hungry, they eat grass. They don't decide what to eat, the object of their need for food is fixed and unchangeable - it's grass and will always be grass. For humans, when we feel hungry, we have to decide what object will satisfy our desire for food, and that can change day to day, hour to hour, and depend on which person we are eating with. Sometimes we don't even eat to satisfy hunger, but to form relationship. Cows don't do that.

Girard's work is founded on the hidden reality that human desire is aimless. It wants without knowing what its objective is. That's why for Girard, our desire is always related to another person, book, advertiser, teacher, movie - something to give our desire direction. Girard says simply : We desire according to the desire of another. Cain saw that Abel had received approval, and wanted the same for himself.

And this is the problem: when enough people in a community desire the same things, these rivalries intensify and eventually a Hobbesian war of "all against all" threatens to break out and destroy the communities themselves just the way the Capulets and the Montagus fought. Lancaster vs York (English War of the Roses). The Hatfields & the McCoys. Thomas Edison vs Nikolai Tesla. (Bill Gates vs Steve Jobs?)

The cycles of conflict repeat themselves over and over until often nobody remembers the source of the original conflict, but only the desire to defeat a rival, who, for all intents and purposes is just like you, because you've imitated him so well.

How do communities overcome this internal strife? Through a bizarre psychosocial mechanism: all the communal violence is suddenly projected upon a single individual, a scapegoat. All the energies spent in rivalry is now united in an effort against someone chosen as a scapegoat. Former enemies now become allies, if not friends, as they communally participate in the execution of violence against a single enemy.

Shakespeare is full of stories of scapegoats. What play am I thinking of? The Roman Senate was divided into two warring groups along lines of old privilege vs. new money. A successful general who gained a great following among the common Romans would not be party to either group, set himself up as powerful arbiter between the two interests, in the interest of the common people. His power and fame among the common people were so great that both sides felt him to be a danger, and he was murdered. Richard III. Merchant of Venice. Henry V all are stories of scapegoats by whose execution the crisis of a culture or land is averted.

This is not scapegoating in the Hebrew-Leviticus sense of the word that we read earlier. This is an unconscious process in which the victim is NEVER recognized as an innocent scapegoat. The scapegoat is always a monstrous creature that transgressed some prohibition and deserves to be punished. The old crone living alone at the edge of the village who had little income or status, but a knowledge of herbs and poultices to cure the sick - she became a witch and had to be killed. The leper deserving only of charity and medical care became not only an outcast, but was frequently chosen to be the scapegoat for his evil deeds - for would God have punished him with leprosy if he were not an evildoer? The Jew? Of course he was responsible for financial collapse in 1930s Germany. Mexicans? All rapists and thieves bent on stealing America's heritage according to Donald Trump and his followers.

Girard insists (and some anthropologists concur) that this is an old, old tactic, older than the Bible, older than Sumeria or Akkad, older than China, this process is older than civilization itself. In each of these cultures, there are stories of scapegoats that were killed, and in so doing, defused cultural tensions and stopped warfare. And it is this scapegoating process which is what allowed civilization to arise. By performing ritual murder, people were given a common outlet for their harmful rivalries, so their communal energies could be put to work again for the good of the community.

Now, here's the thing. Who writes the records of history? The winners, the survivors. So is it any accident that we see that these ritual murders are presented as necessary acts to save the community from some crime committed by the scapegoat? It's an ironic thing, that community arises out of our own violence to one another. But the most important to remember is - and the only way this works is - that the victim must NEVER be perceived as what she or he is - an innocent victim. The scapegoat is always guilty of the most monstrous crimes. The Emmanuel Goldsteins of Orwell's 1984 were always guilty of mass murders, personal outrages and financial collapse. Did Marie Antoinette, the Austrian-born Queen of Louis XVI actually say of the poor "Let them eat cake"? This is a woman known for her generosity in setting up orphanages and poor-houses, but at a time when the Austrian and French empires were battling for Catholic supremacy against the Protestant movements.

And now we can see the motive behind what Kelly Ellard and Warren Glowatsky did to Reena Virk, and why it has been so hard for them to admit their guilt.

But as a method of organizing a civil society, scapegoating has never been very efficient. It causes death and destruction of property, and it never permanently solves the problem of rival desires in the first place. Since mimetic desire remains, the murder has to be re-enacted again and again as tensions rebuild. And this is the wonder of the Hebrew tradition.

In the Hebrew tradition, God begins as a vengeful God who sanctions violence to achieve his goals. We read in 1 Samuel 15 how he charged the Jewish people with eliminating the Amalekites, and their cattle, and their belongings and every trace of them - and how the Jewish people failed to obey, even though Samuel reminds them:

Has the Lord as great delight in burnt-offerings and sacrifices,
as in obedience to the voice of the Lord?
Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice,

But eventually, God comes to be regarded as the saving God of the victims. For the first time in Leviticus, the scapegoat comes to be regarded as innocent, carrying the sins of the Hebrew people with it. The prophets from Isaiah to Habakkuk continually wrestled with the commandment to faithfulness to God's covenant, not in terms of animal sacrifice, which they insisted God regarded as without value, but in terms of a broken and contrite heart. The scapegoat God sought was not the he-goat sent into the wilderness, but the admission of envy, of pride, of rivalry from a broken individual.

It was a hard thing to hear for the Jewish people of the day, and it's no less hard to hear these days. But Girard insists God went one step further. In Jesus, God offered the scapegoat to end all scapegoats. Jesus came to end once and for all the reliance on the ritual sacrifice to achieve peace in community. In the midst of the huge social turmoil of a Roman invasion, with collaborators and zealots battling each others, Pharisees and Sadducees in rival mimetic desire, and tremendous inequality at the root of it all, Jesus is selected, persecuted, blamed of some fault, and executed. Even the apostles succumb to the collective pressure of the mob and abandon him, thus acting with the scapegoaters.

And of course, this is not the end of the story. God resurrects Jesus, and the Evangelists tell the story that Jesus is innocent and blameless, and over time, Jesus comes to be recognized for what he is - an innocent scapegoat. What happens now? An innocent scapegoat doesn't work for the culture any more. Especially an innocent scapegoat that doesn't even blame the people who murdered him! Talk about truly breaking the cycle of redemptive violence!

What God has done with Jesus is irrevocably break the psychosocial mechanism on which our ancient civilizations were founded, so that it can never be used again. (He has given meaning to the aims and goals of the Enlightenment.) That is not to say that God has eliminated violence. We still have free will. And the NT is not all love and peace. "I come not to bring peace, but a sword." said Jesus in Mt 10:34. Do you think this is about Jesus actually committing violence? Not a chance, says Girard - he insists that by ending the cycle of scapegoating, Jesus has exposed the cycle of scapegoating for the malevolent social construct that it is; but those who profited by scapegoating before, will become even more violent as their mimetic desire is exposed.

It is not God or Jesus who brings the sword, but we humans with our mimetic desires. With all our learning, how is it that there are so many people who can still justifying letting poor people starve? As Fort Mac burns, why are people still saying "They deserved it?". Why does Canada have the 6th largest military manufacturing industry in the world if we're a peaceable nation?

Last June, Thomas Bergen spoke to us on Spiritual Warfare for Mennonites - The Gospels and Jesus' War, in which he said that Jesus treated Satan as if he really existed, so how can we Mennonites do less? I think many of us found great difficulty with the concept of a real, existential Satan. Thomas noted that the literal translation of Satan is "The Accuser", and he called us not to battle The Accuser by force of arms, but by caring for those oppressed by Satan. How perfect is that? Girard notes that it is The Accuser who is the one who creates the scapegoat, and The Accuser who goads the community into violence against the victim. The Accuser, then, is to be the focus of the Christian healing ministry.

Does this sound futile to you? Perhaps. But it all begins with each of us, individually, as we listen for the voice of Jesus within us. And let me remind you on this day of Pentecost, that this voice has been made available to us - within us - through the words of Peter and the writings of Luke

²² 'You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs; ²³this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

[...]

³⁷ Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and to the other apostles, 'Brothers, what should we do?' ³⁸Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit [...] ⁴⁰And he testified with many other arguments and exhorted them, saying, 'Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.' [...*the generation that lives in rivalry due to mimetic desire, led by The Accuser...*]

[...and so they did - here is a description of the early church...]

⁴³ Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. ⁴⁴All who believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.

This is what we are called to. This is the goal of the Enlightenment that I grew up in, with the added bonus of a life lived full of the meaning that God supplies to us. Let us never abandon the Anabaptist distinctives so clearly called out to us in this passage. Let us never remove the name Mennonite from our fellowship simply to "fit in". May this day of Pentecost always be your inspiration to work for a new and gentle world of peace and love, so that we may never again need another scapegoat. For we have indeed been offered the Final Scapegoat.